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Joseph C. Harsch

Credentials for the CIA

The Senate Intelligence Committee is investigating the past financial dealings of CIA director William J. Casey. The White House says the President retains "full confidence" in Mr. Casey, but White House aides indicate that this "full confidence" could diminish if the investigation turns up anything serious or unpleasant.

Thus, Mr. Casey's tenure at CIA depends in part on whether there is anything more than is already known about his role in the promotion of business stock issues which proved to be less sound than the advertising implied.

But even if Mr. Casey himself comes through the Senate committee investigation unscathed, two questions have emerged out of recent events at the CIA which could and perhaps should weigh more heavily than Mr. Casey's financial record.

The first question is about Mr. Casey's own judgment.

He insisted on picking as his deputy in charge of CIA "operations" a personal political associate who had no experience in intelligence work, Max Hugel. The selection was strongly opposed within the professional intelligence community and in the White House staff. Mr. Casey was allowed to have his way because he had managed the President's political campaign brilliantly and successfully. It is difficult for any president to say no to his successful campaign manager.

Events since the selection have justified the doubts which had been raised. CIA insiders say that the Hugel performance in charge of the secret and clandestine side of the CIA has been a professional disaster. They say his ignorance of the spy business has alarmed friendly and allied intelligence agencies, thus reducing the normal flow of information to the United States from the resources of other countries. They say that the professionals under him have been demoralized by his ignorance of the business.

The above has come out in the wake of the resignation of Mr. Hugel, brought by newspaper exposure of questionable business dealings. The White House is claiming credit for having allowed Mr. Hugel to resign on the sixth day after the exposure. Intelligence professionals say he should have been fired at once.

So Mr. Hugel is gone from a job for which he was obviously not suited. He has been replaced by a 48-year-old CIA veteran, John H. Stein. Mr. Stein was the person the professionals in the operations directorate of CIA had wanted in the first place. Morale is reported enormously improved since Mr. Stein replaced Mr. Hugel. A question mark is left hanging over Mr. Casey's ability to select subordinates.

More importantly, there is a question left over whether a politician should ever have been put in charge of the CIA.

Historically, American political campaign managers were sent to run the Post Office Department. The classic case was James A. Farley, one of the greatest of them all, who incidentally was an excellent postmaster general — until he broke with Franklin Delano Roosevelt over the third-term issue and retired from government.

There is one argument for putting a politician in that most sensitive of roles in government in Washington. A man with Mr. Casey's record as a successful politician has easy access to the White House. He can take CIA material there and get quicker and more careful consideration for it than could a professional intelligence officer without political credentials.

The purpose of having a Central Intelligence Agency is to provide the president with the best and most objective information and appraisal possible for his foreign policy decisions. Politics will enter into those decisions at the White House, of course. But there is no reason for a CIA to exist unless it can come up with sound nonpolitical material — and get it to the president.

If the man who runs the CIA is himself political and is thinking about what is good for the president on the domestic political stage the president is not certain to get pure and unadulterated intelligence material. His foreign policy decisions may be unduly influenced by politics.

An experience of Mr. Casey's predecessor, Adm. Stansfield Turner, illustrates the point.

When the Shah of Iran was toppled from throne, the US lost a monitoring system on Iran's northern border. Did that loss reduce dangerously US ability to monitor Soviet servance of limits on their numbers and type of strategic nuclear weapons?

Admiral Turner was put under pressure from the White House to tell the Congress that he had alternate and just as good sources. He refused until he was sure it was a fact. (He had just learned recently that he got the Chinese to let him put up new monitoring station in China on the Soviet frontier). His original refusal angered some of the political figures at the White House who declared that the admiral would certainly not be reappointed. Mr. Carter had a second term as President.

The admiral stood his ground under such pressure. Would a politician stand his ground as firmly under similar pressure?

In theory the ideal CIA director would be both an incorruptible professional intelligence officer and a politician. Such men are few and far between. If a choice has to be made it should be on the side of the incorruptible professional.

Guessing in the intelligence community in the wake of the Hugel affair is that the White House will find a more suitable outlet for Mr. Casey's political skills and let the CIA be run by its present deputy director, Adm. Bobby R. Inman, who has the enthusiastic support of the entire intelligence community in Washington.